



By Lily Gordon  
Sunday, July 4, 2010

The Department of Labor has granted an extension of the Career Advancement Account MilSpouse program, which provides millions of dollars in tuition assistance to Fort Benning spouses.

Diane Duboise, the program's coordinator on post, said that during its first 2 1/2 years, the program has helped 689 spouses obtain their degrees using a grant totaling \$2.8 million. Because of the program's success, the Labor department has extended it for one year and included space for an additional 208 aspiring students, which means about 900 Fort Benning spouses will receive tuition assistance.

Launched in November 2007, the Career Advancement Account MilSpouse program was designed to help spouses of service members obtain certification and credentials in high-demand, high-growth, portable careers. The program, which was started by the Department of Labor and the Department of Defense, provides flexible education funding accounts that pay up to \$3,000 a year for tuition, fees, books, equipment, credentialing and licensing fees for spouses in eight states — California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maine, North Carolina and Washington.

In May, the program was abruptly shut down. However, it was later extended for seven of the eight states, with the exclusion of Georgia, according to Congressman Sanford D. Bishop's office. Bishop is the co-chair of the Congressional Military Family Caucus, an organization that facilitates policies that support military families.

When the Democrat heard about Georgia's exclusion from the MilSpouse program, he sent a letter to the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Jane Oates, urging her to extend the resources to Fort Benning military spouses. At the time, there were close to 700 Fort Benning spouses receiving assistance from the program.

"As you know, the program has been extremely important and essential to military installations and military spouses," Bishop wrote in his June 7 letter to Oates. "I would be grateful for your thoughtful reconsideration of extending this grant program at Fort Benning for another year.

At minimum, please ensure that the 700 current spouses at Fort Benning, who are in the middle of their education and training and are being funded by the CAA MilSpouse program, do not lose this vital assistance."

On June 17, the Department of Labor granted the one-year extension and included room for an additional 208 military spouses to benefit from the funding, Bishop said.

"One of the issues is employment for spouses who are required to move frequently," Bishop said. "And in their moves and their desires for careers they need access to education and training. Of course because they move so much they need careers that are portable because they're moving around in support of their service member spouses."

Bishop said Georgia's exclusion from the Department of Labor's extension list was likely an "oversight."

The issue came to the congressman's attention after military spouses contacted his office through Facebook. The Governor's Office of Workforce Development had also contacted Bishop to let him know funding for the MilSpouse program had been discontinued.

"I believe that it's in the best interest of our military to support our military families," Bishop said. "Of course this is a very, very, I think, valuable program and as the congressman who

represents those individuals in our congressional district it would seem appropriate that I would fight for them.”

Melanie-Mandy Frees is the on-site coordinator for the Army Continued Education System center at Fort Benning as well as a recipient of MilSpouse funding. In March, she received her bachelor’s degree in business management with the help of the tuition assistance program.

“It was very easy,” Frees said about working with the Department of Labor to secure her tuition and obtain her degree. “The Department of Labor rep was outstanding. She was very thorough, very detailed. So she doesn’t let anybody slipped through the cracks.”

Military spouses interested in learning more about the MilSpouse program should call the Education Center on Fort Benning to make sure they meet the program’s eligibility requirements.

Briefings about the tuition assistance program are held 9:30 a.m. every Tuesday and Thursday in Building 2611 located in Soldiers Plaza on post.